Review of “Europe: A Nietzschean Perspective”

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Making Good Europeans One European at a Time

As the tenth installment in the Routledge Advances in European Politics series, Elbe’s Europe: A Nietzschean Perspective attempts to offer a guidebook for those interested in seeing the growth of a European identity in general, and the political institutions of the European Union in particular. According to Elbe, the current debate centers around perception that the issue at hand is how the idea of Europe itself is to be identified and clarified, for it is this concept that has remained incomprehensible to contemporary attempts at articulation and understanding.

Discussion surrounding the meaning of ‘Europe’ is nothing new, and some have gone so far as to call the inability to successfully do so a crisis, but Elbe maintains that the debate is “no longer confined to the institutional, legal, and economic aspects of integration that traditionally tended to dominate the domain; it has also entered the cultural realm by opening up the debate about the deeper meaning of the European idea itself,” (1). It is along the lines of this deeper debate that Elbe believes that Nietzsche can be of assistance. Elbe admits from the very beginning that his text is neither a commentary on Nietzsche’s philosophy itself as a whole nor is it an attempt to acknowledge or address the various criticisms that one could raise concerning Nietzsche’s philosophical position. Instead, Elbe offers a limited application of Nietzsche to the particular problem of achieving an understanding of Europe that is comprehensible in the twenty-first century and beyond.

The book itself, which is based on doctoral research conducted within the International Relations Department at the London School of Economics and Political Science, is comprised of six chapters. The first chapter, “Europe,” serves as a general introduction to the problem at hand. Elbe asserts that “a more compelling vision of Europe is needed in order to ensure the continued public legitimacy of the European Union,” (2). Previous attempts to try to insure a shared European identity had centered on traditional nationalistic markers such as the European Union’s flag, anthem and currency, but these attempts have largely met with failure in the eyes of many commentators, including Elbe. Elbe asks “why is it actually proving so difficult to articulate a more meaningful vision of Europe . . . and how might this difficulty be addressed?” (11). It is the attempt to explain the reasons behind the previous difficulty as well as the way towards a possible resolution to the European crisis of meaning that brings Elbe to Nietzsche.

The second chapter, “God or nothingness,” highlights the ways in which the current European attempt to articulate meaning mirrors a gap similar to the dilemma faced by intellectuals in response to the growth
of science. The increasing secular world of the 1800s fostered an atmosphere in which “The novel and additional task confronting Nietzsche’s generation was to come to terms with the potentially profound implications of European secularization . . . the need to render existence meaningful and intelligible in a world where God no longer credibly existed in their imagination,” (19). Elbe correctly points out that for Nietzsche this impasse is one which required not simply an adjustment or re-interpretation of old paradigms, but instead “requires in all likelihood a whole new way of generating ‘meaning’,” (39). The choice is not between the false dualism inherent in the title of this chapter, but, instead, must transcend beyond either God or Nothingness toward the concept of ‘good Europeans’. Chapters three and four (“Labyrinths of the future” and “Europe wants to become one”) lay out some of these possible attempts at this transcendence, in particular discussing the failures of fanatical nationalism (referred to by Nietzsche as a “soil addiction”) and an economic emphasis grounded in functionalism that loses sight of the place of culture in any European identification.

The fifth chapter, “We good Europeans,” begins Elbe’s heavy lifting as he attempts to offer a fuller picture of Nietzsche’s good Europeans and how they would view the current European project. According to Elbe, freedom would replace truth as the highest European value, as the ‘death of God’ begins to be viewed “as a meaningful and celebratory event allowing European culture to explore a new trajectory based on encouraging a deep and creative experience of autonomy,” (90). This new trajectory is made possible by the re-evaluation of values that is the hallmark of much of Nietzsche’s later work, and its importance in dealing with the crisis is to recognize that there is no crisis. Elbe points out that, while the whole dilemma rests on the inability to create a meaningful idea of Europe, this dilemma is not “a sign of a weakened ‘spiritual vitality’ as it would be the sign of a strengthened spirit,” (105). It is the failed will to truth that demands a singular answer to the question of the meaning of Europe, but instead of relying on an answer of and for the whole, Elbe asserts that good Europeans offer a lesson on the power of individual freedom. While this freedom is individual, the experience of this freedom is one of the main attributes within the “general ethos” of good Europeans.

It is this “general ethos” of good Europeans that leads to what Elbe sees as the focal point of the three lasting contributions that Nietzsche can make for the contemporary debates on the meaning of Europe, which are outlined in the last chapter, “Free thoughts.” First, Nietzsche makes the debate itself intelligible, according to Elbe, because Nietzsche’s criticism of the Europe of his day “provides an insightful account of how Europeans traditionally rendered their existence meaningful, why this traditional mechanism of the will to truth lost its persuasiveness in the aftermath of the ‘death of God,’ and why many Europeans nevertheless continue to search for a more meaningful idea of Europe along those lines,” (111). The second contribution Elbe sees Nietzsche providing is found in the distinction between active and passive nihilism. For Nietzsche, the re-evaluation of values is not purely a negative process, for “Nietzsche repeatedly reminded his readers that ‘negating and destroying are conditions of saying Yes’,” (114, quoting Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, ‘Why I Am a Destiny’, §4). Hence, a pessimistic and passively negative response to the problem of capturing the meaning of Europe is something that both Elbe and Nietzsche assert would meet with failure.

It is the third and most important contribution Elbe sees in Nietzsche’s work, however, that dominates both the book and this last chapter – it is the positive vision of the ‘good European’ itself. The ‘general ethos’ referred to above is less a set of characteristics and is instead more “a common sense of autonomy,” (117). It is unclear how this common sense is created, but Elbe is also willing to lay out several characteristics of the new Europe that would result, saying that his new Europe would avoid using
nationalism and racism as a basis for interpreting existence, would refuse to fix a permanent meaning of Europe, and would not force its freedom upon others, (120-121). Elbe adds that “the European Union should try to encourage a Europeanization from below by contributing to the material and educational conditions within which such ‘good Europeans’ could emerge in the years ahead,” (119). It is on this point that the one main flaw I find with Elbe’s work arises, as this point, while perhaps a good one, says little to nothing if it is not followed by a discussion of how, at least in general terms, the EU could achieve these conditions, but there is no seventh chapter laying out the starting point of this line of inquiry.

Elbe deftly skirts past issues of interpretation that might pose problems for other critics (for example, his interpretation of Nietzsche’s variety and application of nihilism serves as one point where Elbe might be brought to task for too quickly passing over rather involved debates). For another example, “The Uneasy European: Nietzsche, Nationalism and the idea of Europe,” an article by Christian J. Emden in the Journal of European Studies (2008; 38, pgs. 27-51), is critical of Elbe’s application of Nietzsche. Emden discusses the degree to which Nietzsche’s “understanding of European civil society is squarely rooted in the nineteenth-century culture of the nation state, while his philosophical reflections on a future Europe remain highly speculative,” (Emden, 28). Emden’s first point is certainly one worthy of discussion, but with regard to the second issue Elbe is not afraid to speculate, and is therefore less concerned with getting Nietzsche “right” as he is making Nietzsche work, not as a system of philosophical thought, but as a sometimes imperfect tool to achieve other intellectual ends. While noted philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum have argued that serious political philosophers should forget about Nietzsche and focus on more worthwhile figures (see the article “Is Nietzsche a Political Thinker’ in the International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 1997: 5,1 for her position), Elbe serves as a reminder of how Nietzsche contributes through the innovations and reflections his works inspire. In the end, as Elbe himself points out, this book should not be classified as a work on Nietzsche’s philosophy, but instead as serving the purpose that the Routledge series intended – attempting to offer a tool for advancing European politics.

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